

The Idea Of Subjective Faith In al-Maturidi's Theology

Yasin Ramazan Başaran¹

Maturidites, one of the major Islamic theological schools, is famous for its formulation of Faith² as *expression by tongue and assent by heart*. It is not accidental that this idea was formulated, if not originated, by Maturidites. For their Samarkandian master Al-Māturīdī (d. 333 AH, 944 AD) declared that attaining knowledge of God independently of prophetic revelation and being grateful to Him through reason are obligations to all those who have the capacity to conduct reasoning.³ However, unlike most Islamic theology books, Al-Māturīdī interestingly starts his masterpiece, *Kitab al-Tawhīd*, with a preliminary discussion of *taqlīd*, namely blindly following one's tradition, instead of delineation of Faith.

In the first chapter of his book, Al-Māturīdī develops the following argument: every admirer of a certain school claims that he is on the right path for salvation. Nevertheless, this is impossible because the ways of some teachers cannot be reconciled with each other. Therefore, either there are contradictory right answers to the same question, or one answer is correct while others are not. Al-Māturīdī opts for the latter because the former is absurd. He announces that the only way to know the correct answer for all humans is to conduct speculative reasoning individually. After mounting this argument for invalidating *taqlīd*, he presents his theory of knowledge in detail.

When I analyze this argument and related chapters in the book, I realize that Al-Māturīdī invalidates *taqlīd* in order to protect the reality of one's Faith since the notion of blindly following another's judgment endangers personal assent. If there is no valid personal assent, there is no sound Faith either. In fact, what Al-Māturīdī advocates, therefore, is the subjective Faith, which is individual, neither communal nor representative, assent to God.

In the present study, I explore the relationship between individual reasoning and Faith in Al-Māturīdī's theory of knowledge because I want to find out why Al-Māturīdī gives priority to discussion of *taqlīd* in his masterpiece called *Kitab al-Tawhīd*. In order to discover his conceptions of *taqlīd* and Faith, we must first examine his theory of knowledge, which is an original theological investigation of great importance. It will provide us a concrete ground for elaborating Al-Māturīdī's idea of subjective Faith.

Before we start, it is necessary to state that this discussion of *taqlīd* has nothing to do with jurisprudence (*fiqh*). For many theologians, technical and occasional inadequacies excuse one's following in an expert's juristic views without knowing his proofs. Therefore, this kind of *taqlīd* is valid, or sometimes even compulsory, according to majority of theologians. However, what we try to discover here is the attitude of accepting one's theological findings without seeking any proof.

¹ PhD Student, Indiana University.

² I use capitalized 'F' for 'Faith' when I mean "īmān" in order not to confuse it with Christian understanding of faith.

³ Madelung, W. "al-Māturīdī, Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd al-Samarkandī." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman; , Th. Bianquis; , C.E. Bosworth; , E. van Donzel; and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2011.

From Knowledge to Proof

Al-Māturīdī is seemingly the first medieval theologian who gives precedence to his theory of knowledge over other theological issues.⁴ He opens his discourse with a chapter of invalidity of *taqlid* and continues with a discussion of means of knowledge. In that chapter, Al-Māturīdī offers two ways of knowing the divine will: reason ('*aql*) and tradition (*sam'*).

For him, tradition, as a source of knowledge, refers to knowledge of past events, names of things, distant countries, benefits and harms of a thing. They are not self-evident nor are we able to witness their reality for ourselves by way of senses. In principle, Al-Māturīdī says, we acquire all our knowledge about external world by way of hearing. However, this kind of knowledge is not valid unless it is transmitted by uninterrupted chains of authority (*mutawātir*) or unless its validity is determined by sensual or rational channels of knowledge.⁵ Thus, the reliable knowledge originated by tradition is of two kinds; one is that *mutawātir*, the other is that which can be validated by reason. Al-Māturīdī asserts that due to the rational signs demonstrating the truth of the message of prophets, their message richly deserves to be admitted as truth.⁶

Reason constitutes the other base for religious knowledge in Maturidian theology because it is only by reasoning that humans can recognize the signs that surround them. According to Al-Māturīdī, theological issues such as the existence and attributes of God can only be known by speculative reasoning (*nazar*). It is the only reliable way because we validate knowledge by the use of reason, not by scriptural revelation alone.⁷

It is also noteworthy that, like any other medieval kalam text, we never encounter the Qur'an and Sunnah as sources of knowledge, or collective reasoning (*ijma*) and analogy (*qiyyas*) as equivalents of reason in *Kitāb al-Tawhīd* because they are considered as judicial (*fīqhi*) terms.⁸ They are not used as premises of theological discussions because only if we are convinced of their authenticity, God's commands can be obtained by way of inference.⁹

Al-Māturīdī considers reason and tradition as twin principles of knowing the divine will. In Al-Māturīdī's mind, their relationship is of an organic character. Reason is welcome to speculate as long as it strives for the true essence of the tradition, and tradition is valid as long as its purpose, structure, and function are endorsed by reason.¹⁰ That is to say, reason must first be disciplined by tradition in order to produce satisfactory results. However, it must have enough self-confidence while keeping sight of the purpose of the revelation.¹¹ It cannot recognize itself as the source of the absolute truth.

By pursuit of reasoning, humans can understand what the consequences of their actions will be.¹² In order to emphasize the necessity of speculative reasoning, Al-Māturīdī elaborates the consequences of it. For him, if one concludes after reasoning that what is told is true, this will be a benefit for him. However, if it is the other way around, he will be aware of the claim's undesirable consequences, or he will, at least, find out there is no way to make sure its certainty. "His *nazar* [speculative reasoning] is a gain in all of its aspects."¹³ Even one reaches at the wrong conclusion, it is still profitable for the performer for fulfilling his rational nature.¹⁴

⁴ Fathalla Kholeif, Analysis of the Contents in the volume *Kitāb al-Tawhīd* (Beirut: Dar al Mashreq, 1970) 20.

⁵ Mustafa Ceric, Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1995), 85.

⁶ Al-Māturīdī, Abū Mansūr, *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*, edited by Fathalla Kholeif (Beirut: Dar al-Mashreq, 1970), 8.

⁷ Al-Māturīdī, *Tawhīd*, 10.

⁸ Ceric, Synthetic, 84.

⁹ J. Meric Pessagno, "Intellect and Religious Assent," *The Muslim World* 69, no. 1 (18-27): 18-27.

¹⁰ Ceric, Synthesis, 91.

¹¹ Ibid., 70-71.

¹² Al-Māturīdī, *Tawhīd*, 137.

¹³ Ibid., 136.

¹⁴ Pessagno, "Intellect," 24.

Nazar leads humans to seek and to find tangible rational proofs (*dalil*) for their beliefs since rational proof (*dalil*) has the first priority in Maturidian theology as an arbiter of truth of religious knowledge. In order to accept authority of a proof, the agent must be convinced of both the soundness of the proofs (*dalil*) of an argument and the credibility of the claimant.¹⁵ Only reason can test both of these standards for any claim and reveal the truth behind the appearance of the argument. Without it, desires of the ego and ignorance veil human sight on the matters.

In his theory, a good *dalil* must be able to convince a fair-minded opponent of a claim's truthfulness.¹⁶ The term 'convince' deserves a special attention here because there is no rational or emotional fixed level of being convinced for all. Soundness of a *dalil* can vary from person to person. Thus, the state of being convinced is all a subjective level and cannot be known by anyone other than the agent and God. We will recall this discussion in the third section.

From Conviction to Assent

In his discussion about Faith (pages 173-181), Al-Māturīdī points out, "knowledge leads to assent"¹⁷. For him, everything can be understood with its contradictory¹⁸ and contradictory of knowing (*ma'rifa*) is not denial (*takzib*) but ignorance (*jahala*). Thus, we cannot us knower and believer synonymous. One who does not know God cannot be considered unbeliever because he did not refuse anything. By this phrase, therefore, he does not mean knowledge causes assent. Knowledge is a channel, a motive, or an occasion that induces one to believe, so that if there is no channel to Faith, there is no proposal either. That is to say, one cannot assent (*tasdīq*) nor deny a proposal if nobody proposes it to him.

As we already mentioned, 'to be convinced' holds a chief role in Maturidi's theory. When agent is convinced that what is said to him is true, the key question arises: Do you assent what have you learned? If the agent affirms that, he will certainly become a believer; if not, he will become a denier. It is interesting to note that acceptance or denial comes after learning. Therefore, what he denies is not to assent to the truth of knowledge because this does not entail commitment. Assent, here, is not comprehension of an abstract truth. Rather, for Pessagno, a contemporary researcher, this is "an acknowledgement that it commands and controls one's life."¹⁹ Assent, to wit, requires a radical shift in agent's understanding and lifestyle.

According to Pessagno, even though Al-Māturīdī does not explicitly deny the possibility of imitated faith, the reader almost expects such an assertion.²⁰ For him, Al-Māturīdī's silence implies two kinds of knowledge; one is derived from argument and proof, while the other from the act of belief. Nevertheless, I find it difficult to apply this distinction in Maturidian theology since there is no reason to call both premises and results of the whole process as 'knowledge'. If knowledge, which stems from either the act of hearing or the act of reasoning, leads to assent, then how does the act of belief cause knowledge? This would be an obvious vicious circle.

Furthermore, Pessagno's reference to another passage of the book (pages 180-181) tells us nothing about these two kinds of knowledge. In his Interpretation of this passage, Pessagno offers two-fold assents in order to reconcile his two-fold theory of knowledge with Maturidian account of assent. For him, the first assent is conducted by intellect, while the second has nothing to do with it. It is the act of heart.²¹ Pessagno concludes that intellect and religious assent are not opposing forces, but commands of God. However, he fails to explain how they are related to each other in the process of Faith. Here again, it is difficult to accept the distinguished assents because this distinction relies upon an assumption that all the process of understanding occurs out of the heart. This line of thought is far enough from

15 Pessagno, "Intellect," 20.

16 Ibid.

17 Al-Māturīdī, *Tawhīd*, 380-381.

18 Pessagno, "Intellect," 25.

19 Pessagno, "Intellect," 26.

20 Ibid., 20.

21 Pessagno, "Intellect," 26.

explaining Maturidian concepts because if we apply this reading of the text, we will lack the understanding of Al-Māturīdī's argument concerning the distinction between believer and knower. In his discussion of faith, Al-Māturīdī argues that if there were nothing in the heart other than knowledge, those who know God would not be accused of being unbeliever.²² Al-Maturidi, from my perspective, not only emphasizes the role of assent in Faith, but also establishes that the entire process takes place in the heart.

Pessagno's depiction of faith as a destination and of intellect as a way through it does not fit well with Al-Māturīdī's account of Faith and reasoning. Rather, I propose a picture of constantly growing understanding by reasoning and increasing the intensity of sureness. One's doubt is gradually resolved during his journey of understanding. The claim, in other words, makes much more sense to an agent over time. After he assents the reality of it, he starts naturally seeing things in harmony with the claim. For this reason, I am suggesting to call '*understanding by heart*' for the stage subsequent to the assent. If the entire process of Faith is an attempt to have a better understanding of what is told, namely the claim, one can hit the peak in the heart.

By '*understanding by heart*', I do not mean that the earlier stages occur somewhere else. However, we must distinguish between understanding the literal meaning of a sentence and understanding after the approval of its truth. While the former is a habitual or customary act, the latter is to grasp the very meaning of a sentence. Nobody who understands the meanings of the words at face value automatically becomes a believer; he has to go beyond all the stages we discussed. This way of thought is consistent with Al-Māturīdī's definition of *īman* as "inner assent or conviction with the formal expression of belief."²³ In addition, when describing prophet Abraham's demand on witnessing the resurrection of dead birds, Al-Māturīdī presents his argument that God asks Abraham if he *does not believe* rather than he *does not know*. This higher level of understanding, for Al-Māturīdī, is a gift (*hibe*) from God.²⁴ Thus, we can conclude that the entire process represents a journey from a lower understanding to a higher one.

To sum up, the whole process of Faith is actually a process of understanding. When one is convinced of the truth of a claim by way of reasoning, he encounters the question of applying this claim in his life. If he approves, he can understand by heart what he is told. This is the highest point in Faith.

Taqlid and Subjective Faith

Although various theological schools vary on many of theological ideas, their positions concerning *taqlīd* change a little. They all unite in opposition to the notion of blindly following someone else's tradition. For instance, for Al-Ash'ari (d. 324 AH/936 AD), the founder of the Ash'arite school, requirement for a valid Faith is to assent, by the help of reason, the truthfulness of what the Prophet (*pbuh*) said, and to express it by tongue.²⁵ Ash'arite theologians declare the imitator (*mukallid*) as an unbeliever since one of the requirements of Faith, as stated above, is the intellectual argument (*istidlal*).²⁶ According to their doctrine of Faith, nobody can become a believer unless he believes in God by way of reason. Every individual must inspect and explore religious arguments and doctrines that he believes in. Rejection of *taqlīd* is so strictly related to knowledge in Ash'arite theology that if one simply imitates another's word without knowing the latter's truthfulness and accuracy, that means the former does not know; thus he does not believe either.²⁷ Some Ash'arites go so far as to say that for a valid Faith one must cast doubts after he reaches maturity and later clear it up with rational arguments.²⁸

22 Al-Māturīdī, *Tawhīd*, 380.

23 Al-Māturīdī, *Tawhīd*, 373.

24 Ibid., 380.

25 From Nasafî's *Tabsiratu'l-Adilla*, cited in Tevfik Yucedogru, "Mukallidin İmani," *Uludag Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakultesi Dergisi* 14, no. 1 (2005): p. 19-40.

26 Kholeif, Analysis, 25.

27 Richard M. Frank, "Knowledge and Taqlid: The Foundations of Religious Belief in Classical Ash'arism," *Journal of American Oriental Society* 109, no. 1 (1989), 37-62.

28 Kholeig, Analysis, 25.

Like Ash'arites, their chief opponents, Mu'tazilites, have similar view on the issue. For Mutazilites, the foundation of religion is based on reasoning and intellectual argument and it is necessary for one to have recourse to proofs of reason and tradition in order to believe.²⁹ According to Qadi Abd'al-Jabbar (d. 414 AH, 1024 AD), the most popular Mutazilite theologian, nazar is the first duty that God imposes upon humans and obligatory for all.³⁰ Mutazilites rejects even blind acceptance of the authority of scholars. For them, *taqlid*, accepting a religious statement of someone else without asking any proof, shackles the reason of the follower. Since knowledge is the essential foundation of Faith, and since *tasdiq* is not a way for acquiring knowledge, those who blindly trust another's judgments cannot know phases of faith.³¹

Al-Māturīdī comes into play with a similar claim but on a different ground: "Taqlid cannot be a criterion for an ultimate religious truth"³² because everybody freely chooses to believe and this belief must be established on his personal effort, rather than a trust on another's.³³ One's own wrong belief is worthier for him than another's correct belief. Discussing the notion of taqlid at the beginning of his masterpiece, *Kitab at-Tawhīd*, Al-Māturīdī establishes, in fact, the purpose of the book: validation of his beliefs through speculative reasoning. It is worth quoting him in full:

What they believe is right and what others believe is wrong, although all agree that each of them has a predecessor who is to be followed unquestioningly (*yuqallad*), and it has been established that *taqlid* is not something which excuses the *muqallid*, because others (*muqallids*) like him have reached opposite conclusion [by following the same method]³⁴. Moreover there is nothing in it (*taklid*) except the great number (of its adherents) unless one of those who originate teaching has a rational argument by which his correctness in what he claims may be known, and a proof which convinces the judicious that he has hit the truth. Thus the man who is *muqallid*'s authority in religion, and who advances an argument the truth of which one is obliged to admit, is the one who is right. It is the duty of every *muqallid* to know the truth in what he professes.³⁵

It is obvious from this passage that Al-Māturīdī strictly adheres to the necessity of individual reasoning in the process of Faith. His strong attack upon *taqlid* clearly demonstrates that Al-Māturīdī thinks humans are capable of having Faith themselves and this capacity makes them responsible for their lives.³⁶ That is to say, intellectual activity is a requirement for those who have capacity. But those whose intellects are covered with blindly following can neither be convinced of the truth of a claim nor answer the question of assent (Do you assent what have you learnt?) because they are unaware of proofs of their claims.

If an individual's faith only consists of an affirmation of someone else's statements, but not on his own,³⁷ there is no way to decide whether this individual's belief is true or not. In this respect, everything would have the same truth-value. Taqlid, therefore, most interestingly, endangers the truth-value of statements concerning Faith.³⁸

It is absurd that the attainment to the truth (*sabab al-haqq*) should work in this way, namely, that the falsehood be conceived in the same manner as truthfulness.³⁹

As the corollary of this argument, we may assert that Al-Māturīdī rejects the idea of incomprehensive divine wisdom.⁴⁰ There must be a link between God's wisdom and human intellect. That is to say, reason is capable of

29 Yucedogru, "Mukallid," 27.

30 Richard C. Martin, Defenders of Reason in Islam (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997), 90.

31 From Qadi Abd al-Jabbar's *Sharkh al-Usul al-Khamsa*, cited in Yucedogru, "Mukallid," 23. Also in Richard Martin's translation of *Kitab al-usul al-khamsa* in Defenders of Reason in Islam.

32 Ceric, Synthetic, 68.

33 Jeffry R. Halverson, Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 29.

34 Square brackets are mine.

35 Al-Māturīdī, Tawhīd, 3. (Translation provided in Kholeif, Analysis, 26-27)

36 Halverson, Creed, 24.

37 Ibid., 29.

38 Pessagno, "Intellect," p. 27.

39 Al-Māturīdī, Tawhīd, p. 6. (Translation provided in Ceric, Synthesis, 90)

comprehending everything in the divine message. The otherwise would be absurd. Moreover, if a man is unable to understand what is told, he is not indebted to believe. The deeper one understands, the bigger his responsibility. Consequently, everybody is obliged to have Faith in accord with his level of understanding. This conclusion not only supports our claim at the end of the first section that conviction is a personal state that cannot be known by somebody else, but also establishes the foundation of the idea of subjective faith in Maturidian theology.

A Maturidian theologian Abu'l-Mu'in al-Nasafi, asserts that different intellectual capacities of humans causes different levels of Faith.⁴¹ In this respect, everybody has his own understanding of religion depending on his capacity of comprehension. Namely, while the object of Faith remains the same, reflection of this faith differs from human to human. Therefore, man is asked to have a subjective (or personal, or individual) faith. Maturidi's opinion about speculative reasoning corroborates our result:

If man is short of understanding of the bearing of the command, he is excused from it. However, the principle ways to that (understanding) are different; the kinds of these ways are known through speculative reasoning (nazar) and intellectual exercise (fikr).⁴²

Al-Māturīdī's idea is based on the fact that every human being has a unique capacity to understand what is told. And religious statements are no exceptions of it. Therefore, it is impossible for a religious statement to be understood in the same way by anyone who encounters with it.

In addition, all stages of the process of Faith, to some degree, are subjective. For instance, the agent's ability of reasoning determines soundness, if not validity, of a proof (*dalil*) that he encounters. One may find a proof ambiguous, while another is convinced of its soundness. Likewise, a sound proof may not be sufficient for convincing a fair-minded, but obstinate, man.

This theory, also, guarantees human's free will because nobody has authority to approve or reject another's Faith. A strong conviction does not necessarily cause Faith in the heart because, this time, volition (*ikhtiyar*) comes into play and determines if the agent will change his life according to new conditions.⁴³

The notion of subjective faith also helps us understand why there is no fixed border between *taqlid* and *ijtihad* in Islamic theology. For Ceric, Al-Māturīdī was the first theologian who realized the problem and suggested a solution.⁴⁴ Because there is no limit for understanding, there is no limit for escalating to a higher level of faith either.

All of these clearly demonstrate the subjective nature of Faith. On the other hand, it would be wrong to conclude that Al-Māturīdī offers religious subjectivism. Neither Al-Māturīdī nor any other Muslim theologian proposed a Faith depending upon one's subjective assumptions. What is in Al-Māturīdī's theory is that different intensities of understanding of the exact same religious claim. Otherwise reading falls short of explaining Al-Māturīdī's insistence on uniqueness of truth.⁴⁵ It is simply that a man can comprehend meaning of a sentence (claim) deeper than another man can. Even if what their understandings of it change from one to another, the claim remains in the same form. This may be why Al-Māturīdī titled his book as *Tawhīd*: while every single person's level differs, the content of Faith remains the same.

40 Pessagno, "Intellect," 21.

41 Yucedogru, "Mukallid," 35.

42 Al-Māturīdī, *Tawhīd*, 137. (Translation provided in Ceric, *Synthesis*, 70)

43 This is of another discussion that deserves an intense scrutiny. However, it is beyond the scope of the present study.

44 Ceric, *Synthesis*, 68-69.

45 Ceric, *Synthesis*, 90.

Conclusion

It is obvious that, for Al-Maturidi, the notion of *taqlid* is not acceptable in terms of Faith. He deserves the most credit for invalidating it on a theological ground. For him, an assent that is devoid of a rational base cannot be qualified as *īman* because it lacks foundation. Thus, *Taqlid* not only endangers the truth of a claim, but also threatens the person's aftermath. In order to avoid such an undesirable consequence, Al-Māturīdī advocates an assent that is provided by rational argument and personal conviction. Whether one touches the truth at the end of his journey, he will be awarded due to his exertion towards understanding. By using his reason, every single person has the opportunity to escalate his status in Faith by way of experiencing all the steps individually. Faith, therefore, in Al-Māturīdī's picture, is a process rather than a destination. In addition, by way of individual reasoning, one can deepen his understanding. And the deeper one's understanding is, the higher his level in Faith might be.

To sum up, by giving priority to the discussion of Taqlid, Al-Māturīdī tries to establish a firm ground for his theory of knowledge and conception of Faith that is formulated as *expression by tongue and assent by heart*. I think the reason that many Muslim schools of thought also hold this formulation to be true lies behind its provision to subjective character of Faith that guarantees its distinct interpretations. This idea of subjective Faith is so penetrated into Muslim minds that a Turkish thinker, Ibrahim Haqqi Erzurumi (d. 1193 AH, 1780 AD), after centuries, perhaps under the influence of this idea, states that the fact of various beliefs of various persons is evidence for the greatness of the Creator, because He shows Himself different to all of His servants.

Bibliography

- Al-Maturidi, A. M. (1970). *Kitāb al-Tawhid*. Beirut: Dar al-Mashreq.
- Ceric, M. (1995). *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*. Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization.
- Frank, R. M. (1989). Knowledge and Taqlid: The Foundations of Religious Belief in Classical Ash'arism. *Journal of American Oriental Society*, 37-62.
- Halverson, J. R. (2010). *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Martin, R. C., Woodward, M. R., & Atmaja, D. S. (1997). *Defenders of Reason in Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld.
- Pessagno, J. M. (1979). Intellect and Religious Assent. *The Muslim World*, 18-79.
- Yucedogru, T. (2005). Mukallidin Imani. *Uludag Universitesi İlahiyat Fakultesi Dergisi*, 19-40.